



# DON'T LET IT GET YOU DOWN

*Essays on Race, Gender,  
and the Body*

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**Savala Nolan**

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“Savala Nolan is powerful and complex... Like Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, Nolan’s essays speak to both young and old Americans about our country’s pervasive history of racism.”

—*BookPage* \*STARRED REVIEW\*

“An eloquently provocative memoir in essays... This fierce and intelligent book is important not just for how it celebrates hard-won pride in one’s identity, but also for how Nolan articulates the complicated—and too often overlooked—nature of personal and cultural in-betweenness.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“A deeply personal debut collection... the mix of cultural criticism and thoughtful personal writing will be just right for fans of Roxane Gay.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“In gorgeous prose and with profound clarity, Savala Nolan reckons with the interconnected oppressions, external and internalized, that have burdened her body: Anti-blackness, fat phobia, colonialism, and patriarchy. *Don’t Let it Get You Down* is vital reading for all of us working to bust out of boxes, binaries, silences, and shame.”

—**Nadia Owusu, author of *Aftershocks***

“It takes temerity to tell this kind of truth, to be unbowed by one’s own trepidation. Savala Nolan does so boldly, and this book will help so many Black women to get free.”

—**Brittney Cooper, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Eloquent Rage***

“In these thrilling essays, built with one blazing, breathtaking sentence after another, Savala Nolan takes us from the personal to the political and back again as she explores her fascinating range of experiences as a Black American woman. Authoritative, honest, and often biting humorously, *Don’t Let It Get You Down* is a book for our time and every time. It is not a book to read; it is a book to savor.”

—**Emily Bernard, author of *Black is the Body***

“In this woven tapestry of stories and histories of race, gender, class, and the body, Savala Nolan gives readers a deeply personal insight into what it feels like to hold identities that are seen as ‘other’ in dominant culture. For those of us who feel like ‘in-betweeners’ this powerful collection of poetic essays offers a place to be seen and to be heard in the fullness of our beautiful complexities. In reading Savala’s words as she travels to understand her experiences, and free herself from the parts that oppress, I found myself saying, ‘Wow. Yes. Me too.’”

—Layla F. Saad, author of *New York Times* bestseller *Me and White Supremacy*

“Savala Nolan deals a blow to the hollow—and very white—rhetoric of the body positivity movement with her essay collection, offering up her own stories of living in a body that are nuanced and warm, funny and painful.”

—Marisa Meltzer, author of *This is Big*

Writer, speaker, and lawyer Savala Nolan is mixed-race, descended from a Black and Mexican father and a white mother, and has experienced both the discomfort of generational poverty and the ease of wealth and privilege. At her mother’s encouragement, she began her first diet at the age of three and has been both fat and painfully thin throughout her life.

It is these liminal spaces—of race, class, and body type—that the essays in **DON’T LET IT GET YOU DOWN** excavate, presenting a clear, complex understanding of our society’s most intractable points of tension. The twelve essays that comprise this collection are rich with unforgettable anecdotes, and are as humorous and as full of Nolan’s appetites as they are of anxieties. The result is lyrical and magnetic.

In her essays, she investigates her morbid fascination with shows that glamorize violence against women like *Law & Order: SVU*, her history of self-erasure while dating white men, her white family’s history of owning enslaved people, and the bone-deep anxiety of raising a daughter in this world. In the titular essay “Don’t Let it Get You Down,” we traverse the cyclical richness and sorrow of being Black in America. Nolan’s work is rooted in the body and our experiences there.

Perfect for fans of *Heavy* by Kiese Laymon and *Bad Feminist* by Roxane Gay, **DON’T LET IT GET YOU DOWN** delivers an essential perspective on race, class, bodies, and gender in America today.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Savala Nolan** is a writer, speaker, and lawyer. She is executive director of the Thelton E. Henderson Center for Social Justice at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law. She and her writing have been featured in *Vogue*, *Time*, NPR, *Forbes*, *Huffington Post*, *Health*, *Shape*, and more. She served as an advisor on the Peabody-winning podcast, *The Promise*. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her family.

#### **ABOUT THE BOOK**

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**Q&A with Savala Nolan**  
**Author of DON'T LET IT GET YOU DOWN**

**Q: Where does the title—DON'T LET IT GET YOU DOWN—come from?**

A: That phrase was advice given to me by an older Black person—my hairdresser—and I tell the story in the book. I was at the salon and happened to see on my news app that the cops who killed Tamir Rice were not going to be prosecuted. I was visibly shaken. The familiar feeling of powerlessness, of pain, of outrage washed over me. My hairdresser, who I've known for years, noticed and asked what was wrong. I told him the news, and he said, "Don't let it get you down, don't let it get you down." But he didn't say it with any of the bright, peppy energy we associate with the phrase. Instead, his voice was heavy and weary. It felt more like a warning than a pep talk. And I realized he was offering me a survival strategy. Because if you are Black—or part of any deeply marginalized community—and you let how you're treated get you down, you may never get up. It can be so merciless, and so relentless, that if you allow it to get you down, you may drown. You have to find a way to stay afloat. That's how I mean the phrase in the title of my book—as a survival strategy.

There's another way, though, in which the title could almost have a question mark at the end. It could almost be an inquiry when I'm speaking to people who hold a lot of privilege, or the privileged aspects of myself. That audience, I think, probably *should* let the state of things get them down. They *should* pay very close attention to our history and our present, and let the truth bring them to their knees. That's a prerequisite to change, to creating a more equitable set of laws and norms and an equitable distribution of resources and wellbeing in our culture.

**Q: You have written essays for outlets like *Vogue* ("[Say Their Names: Breonna Taylor, My Great-Great-Grandmother, and Me](#)") and *Time* ("[Black and Brown People Have Been Protesting for Centuries. It's White People Who Are Responsible for What Happens Next.](#)") before – what was it like writing a book-length collection? How did you piece together the essays into a cohesive whole?**

A: The essays in this collection are bound together by the body. There's a corporeal thread woven through and between each piece. I talk about my body, of course, but also other people's bodies, too—the bodies of white men I've known, from people I wanted to date to terrifying skinheads I once encountered. I write about the large, dark body of my Black father, and compare it to the body of my white mother—what did those bodies mean for the trajectory of their lives, and for how they approached parenting? I talk about female bodies, about fatness, about thinness, and so on. I focus so hard on the body because the body is where we experience all the definitional categories of our lives—race, class, gender, and more. It's home to everything we know about the world, and it's inescapable. There's no getting away from our bodies, and over the course of our lives they become the site of so much knowledge and epiphany, of humor and grief, of truth but also lies. The personal and the political are in constant collision in our bodies—though not all of us are aware of that, and different bodies experience that ongoing collision differently.

**Q: You write movingly of your daughter in the book in a way that many mothers will relate to—how you love deeply and fear deeply for a small human who will be a woman among misogynists, who will be Black among racists—could you talk about what drove you to share those experiences? Do you view motherhood differently now that your daughter is a bit older?**

A: I'm not sure I had a choice in whether to write about these concerns—they are top of mind, they are time-sensitive, and teaching my daughter about her (mixed-Black, female) body is one of my central jobs as her mother. When she was very young, I was bemoaning some aspect of parenting and a friend with older kids said, "Just wait. Little kids, little problems. Big kids, big problems." *Problems* is a strong word—so let's say conundrums. As she's grown, I no longer puzzle about how to get her to use a sippy cup instead of a bottle. I now puzzle about how to teach her that she isn't white—that's a complex, ongoing process, where I'm balancing truth that can harm her (the truth about racial hierarchy) with the need to root her deeply in a sense of wholeness and pride around her racial identity. I puzzle about how to teach her to be safe as a girl—when, exactly, do I begin letting her know that the world will not protect her? That the world will often treat her body as an object? How do I balance preparing her for reality with preserving her innocence? Like most writers, I write to understand. It's how I make sense of what's before me, and what's already happened. So writing about this aspect of motherhood was almost

mandatory. Whether it made it into the book was another question! But writing about it was going to happen one way or the other.

**Q: In the essay “Bad Education” you explore how we consume “violence against women as entertainment,” interwoven with stories from your own life. Why did you want to write about this difficult topic, and how do you see it fitting into the other themes of the book?**

A: I wanted to write about it because my own behavior confused me. I’m a feminist, I’ve experienced sexual assault, and I’m disgusted by how subordinated women are in our culture. But I am also a person who has sat on the couch and watched *Law and Order: SVU* marathons. That is to say, I’ve enjoyed hours and hours of entertainment that draws its force from telling stories about violence against women. That shows their dead, tortured bodies. I couldn’t reconcile these aspects of myself. How did I arrive at a place where I rage against what women are subjected to, yet am entertained by watching scenes of that subjugation?

I discovered that my education in violence against women started very early, possibly before I was even born, and continued through nearly every phase of my life, from men I dated to music I listened to. It’s an education that teaches women we are, almost by definition, in danger, or subject to harm. It’s also an education that teaches us we don’t have a right to retributive rage or action—our anger isn’t totally acceptable to the culture. Ultimately, it’s an education that normalizes our precarity so thoroughly that, not only do we come to accept our status as violable people, we come to a place where stories of this violation are *entertaining*. Hence the *SVU* marathons (among other things—I used to workout to Eminem).

It’s a complicated dynamic, right? Because on the one hand, a show like *SVU* validates women’s experiences by shedding light on how we are harmed. On the other hand, these stories partially reproduce the very problem they are trying to solve: the normalization of violence against women. It seems to represent the kind of rock-and-a-hard place that not only women face, but also Black people, fat people, and other marginalized groups. How do we talk about what we endure—what are bodies contend with—without reifying it? How do we tell our stories without feeling that we are parading ourselves before the cold eye of the culture, serving as some form of perverse entertainment?

**Q: You did a fair amount of research on your own family history to inform your writing. How did you approach this research, and what did you learn?**

A: I approached it with both trepidation and longing. A few years ago, we learned that my white Virginian forebears owned slaves. (This is a phrase I always want to put in quotes—*you cannot own another person*—but the phrase reflects the legal reality of the time even if it flouts a timeless moral reality, so I use it.) It wasn’t a surprising fact—many, many white families in this country have direct, strong (and ongoing) connections to the economy of chattel slavery, and I think, being mixed Black people, my siblings and I just knew there was a good chance our family was among those many others.

But it wasn’t easy information to absorb, either. And before I went through the trouble of metabolizing it—as their descendent, as a Black person—I needed to know more. I needed to understand the scope of our involvement. Were we major slaveholders? Minor? I don’t know how to answer that question even now, but I learned that my forebears were human traffickers, buying and selling Black men, women, and children, and holding them captive, in bondage and against their will, for decades. From the 1770s through the years before the Civil War.

These were, and are, grueling facts to reckon with. So I approached the research slowly, incredibly slowly. I took long breaks. I put files away in boxes in the basement. I resisted, even as I was desperate to understand. What pulled me back to the material was wanting to know anything I could about the people we enslaved. I felt a need to honor them, to tell the truth about them however I could. Both as a penance to them, and as a way of connecting with my own enslaved ancestors on the Black side of my family, whose identities are lost forever. And what enabled me to honor that pull toward the material was being a lawyer. I’m trained, as a lawyer, to engage with the facts. Good, bad, ugly, horrid—you don’t have a chance of solving the problem if you don’t have the facts. Being a lawyer made me brave enough to honor the call I felt to learn the truth.

**Q: You’re a lawyer and the executive director of the Thelton E. Henderson Center for Social Justice at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law, where you also teach. Are there connections between your work as a lawyer and this book?**

A: Absolutely. First and foremost, I run the social justice program, so even when I'm not writing I'm thinking about questions of belonging, of subordination, of privilege and power and resources and safety. I'm just focused on *law and policy*, and how law and cultural hierarchy co-create each other. Or, to phrase it differently, how ideas about bodies show up in our laws, and how laws create our ideas about bodies.

I also teach a class on movement lawyering and identity. Movement lawyering is a style of lawyering that centers clients' knowledge and building clients' long-term power over the expertise of the lawyer. And for folks who want to go into that kind of work, where you are very often serving people who've been marginalized, sometimes brutally, your thoughts and feelings about identity need to be examined. You need to examine what you've internalized about other people's identities—what you perhaps unconsciously think about Black people, or fat people, or poor people, so that you don't have your biases standing in between you and your client, limiting what you can do for them. And you need to examine what you've internalized about yourself—your own anti-Blackness, if you're black; your own fatphobia, if you're fat—so that these misbeliefs about yourself don't stand between you and your power as an advocate.

So, yes, my work as a lawyer is related to the book. Many of the things that preoccupy me as a lawyer also preoccupy me as a writer.

**Q: Through your own experiences, you show how slippery class can be. What do you think most people misunderstand about class in America?**

A: I can only answer this from my own life experience. But what I've seen is that moving up the socioeconomic class ladder has limited power to save you. I think most people get that when you have less money, everything else is harder, and when you have more money, many things are easier. But it doesn't save you. I'm thinking about race specifically—there is so much data (around maternal mortality, for instance) showing that the brutality of racism lands on Black women regardless of how much money they make, and my own personal experience with pregnancy and the medical industry applies here, too.

I also wonder how many people understand that “class” is not absolute; you can code switch for class just as much as anything else. I, for example, went to extremely wealthy private schools, but I didn't come from money. Once I got the hang of things, I was able to “pass” in those spaces, or in my friend's homes, because I understood how to speak, what to talk about, what to like and dislike, how to dress, etc. I didn't seem like a scholarship kid, though I was. To the extent class is a set of habits or a dialect, I could appear pretty in-the-know, pretty fluent. I could also appear pretty fluent in the flipside of that class coin, though obviously I was exposed to wealth and had the privilege of attending these posh schools. If I was staying at my dad's house on the weekend, I was in a physical space of deep, generational poverty. He didn't have electricity, or running water, or even window panes—and I knew how to “be” in that place, too. I didn't seem like a rich kid who was slumming it. I could enact the habits and dialect of that class, too.

**Q: What is the most important thing you hope readers will take away from your book?**

A: I hope readers get to the last page and experience two things. First, the sense that they've brushed up against truths they didn't know existed, or knew existed but didn't have words for.

Second, I hope they come away with a deeper appreciation for the work their body is doing in our culture. Meaning, a deeper appreciation for how the political and personal collide in their bodies, and what that means for how they interact with other human beings and how they understand the story of their lives.

My body, with its “in-betweenness,” is somewhat different than many people's bodies, and that gives me particular insights; but we all have bodies, and therefore we're all implicated in the systems of race, gender, and class that choreograph our culture. We can all relate, on some level, to being liberated, or empowered, or made safe, or made unsafe by our bodies, by what other people make of them. We can all relate to the frictions and joys that emerge when we move through the world as embodied beings. So I hope all readers feel truth in the book, whether it takes the form of feeling seen and validated, or of revelation and insight.